

## Telling the Stories of Left-behind Children in China: From Diary Collection to Digital Filmmaking

Janice Hua Xu

### Abstract

*The issue of "left-behind children" in China has been widely recognized as a significant social problem, as more than 61 million children are living in villages away from their parents, who have migrated to large cities to seek employment opportunities. There is a very limited number of media products depicting left-behind children in rural China as central characters with individual personalities. This paper analyzes how stories and voices of this underprivileged group are presented in recent years to the public in different non-fictional media forms, particularly documentary films. Through content analysis of selected film samples, the paper examines how narratives are weaved about the lives and emotions of these children, and how the stories make sense of their family experiences. The paper discusses the power of digital narratives and visual-based expressions in representing this special group in remote areas of the country. It also examines how the products of representation are mediated by different types of storytellers, who are often motivated by a sense of social engagement to raise awareness about the plight of these children to appeal for support, but addresses the issue from their specific perspectives.*

### Introduction

Left-behind children refer to rural children under 18 who are left at home when both or one of their parents migrate to urban area for work. Across China more than 61 million children – nearly a quarter of children in China – live in rural villages without the presence of their parents, who have migrated in search of work to provide a better life for their families. Recent findings showed that left-behind children were disadvantaged by developmental, emotional and social problems (Su, Li, Lin, Xu, Zhu, 2013). Researchers found that due to a lack of family protection and educational opportunities, there have been growing signs of serious mental health problems and an increased criminal record among this vulnerable group (CCRCSSR, 2014). Because migrant workers rarely get to spend time with their children, children often feel lonely and helpless, and sometimes have the fear of being abandoned. They are more prone to skipping class, fighting and even dropping out of school, as their caretakers are often unable or unwilling to monitor their study habit. It is also found that left-behind children had lower scores in health behavior and school engagement than rural children of non-migrant worker parents (Wen & Lin, 2012).

This paper analyzes how the situation of this underprivileged group is presented in recent years in platforms outside mainstream media, specifically in documentary films. It examines how narratives are weaved about the lives of these children by different storytellers, and how the stories make sense of their unique family experiences with absent parents to the audience. As Stuart Hall states, representation is the process or channel or medium through which meanings are both created and reified. Culture depends on giving things meaning by assigning them to different positions within a classificatory system. The marking of "difference" is thus the basis of that symbolic order which we call culture. As Corner (1995: 143) proposes with respect to the documentary, media scholars need to "develop closer and better micro-analysis, of the language and image of the media." Silverstone points out that the study of media mediation of reality requires giving attention to both the institutions and technologies via which the circulation of news discourse takes place (2004). Also, mediation can be seen as a public-political process, a process that sets up norms of public conduct and shapes the spectator as a citizen of the world, and carries important ethical power of contemporary public life (Chouliaraki, 2006).

Traditionally, Chinese media rarely put children as the main subjects of reporting except for programs produced for children, with content that usually emphasize "childishness" and "prettiness" (Donald, 2005). In 1999–2000, CCTV produced a series on children in the Western provinces in connection with the national campaign of "opening up the West," portraying these children as "clever, decorative, and different," but their problems such as poverty and lack of media access were not foregrounded (Donald, 2005, p.9). Media reports in China about LB children started to appear in 2002, and increased in numbers in 2006, when a legislation was proposed at Chinese People Consultative Conference by 24 members to establish a mechanism to safeguard these children's healthy growth. More media reports have been addressing this matter since 2010, when a few provinces passed laws to protect the rights of minors, with decrees referring to the LB children (Zeng, 2013). However, media representations of these children in news reports were often stereotypes, usually as targets of charity or protective policy, or as "problematic children." Academic research papers by scholars usually focus on sociological and psychological issues caused by absent parents and present these children as one abstract category. It is very rare to have their own voices heard or individual personalities represented in the media.

In 2012, a collection of the diaries of 26 "left-behind children" in China's remote Guizhou province was published in the form as a book. It unveils for the first time the inner lives of these young people. Their 34-year-old teacher, Yang Yuansong, who initiated the project by compiling diaries, letters, and pictures of these children whose average age was 9, explained his motivation: "People tend to have a stereotype about left-behind children, seeing them as pitiful kids who live in poverty and isolation. People think all they need is something to eat and wear. But they are so much more than that." He traveled to Beijing and Shanghai to look for publishers but was refused 10 times before finally securing a publisher in Jiangsu province. With an initial print run of 15,000 copies, the book sold more than 100,000 copies in a few months (Sun, 2013).

While there is a lack of in-depth reports on the LB children issue in mainstream media, news reports about shocking events, such as children's deaths from accidents caused by lack of supervision or arrests of rural elementary school teachers molesting LB children, have brought more attention across the nation to the precarious condition in

which some left-behind children live, as well as the long-term consequence of having absent parents working far away from their hometowns. In 2013, Phoenix Satellite Television Company made a 5-episode documentary titled *The Left-behind Children in China*, with interviews with residents at various locations in China as well as scholars and education experts. CCTV also made public service announcements encouraging volunteers to contribute to the growth of these children, and covered this topic in talk show programs.

Outside the programs produced by Chinese mainstream media, there have been a few dozens of films or "minifilms" made on LB children. These documentary films can be divided into the following categories: corporate public affair mini documentary, films by independent filmmakers, and films by volunteer/student teams. Although they share the general theme of raising awareness about the LB children and calling for love and care for them, each has its unique strengths in telling a story, and tends to take narrative structures that reflect the implied messages of the film.

### Corporate Public Affair Mini Documentary

Western corporations conducting business in China have engaged in various public relations initiatives to build a brand image among Chinese consumers, including making public affair mini documentaries. The issue of LB children can appeal to a wide audience and is politically safe, unlike many other problems facing Chinese society such as pollution, food safety, corruption, and so on.



Coca-Cola and PR agency McCann's Shanghai branch created a 4-minute documentary entitled 'Love and Care for China's left-behind Children' which launched across China, and was shared on social media and shown on taxi screens before the 2014 Chinese New Year holiday starts. It was viewed more than 2 million times on video sharing website tudou.com. It draws people's attention to the vital

question of how the children cope without their parents, and how parents cope without seeing their children, focusing on the hope and joy of reunion at Chinese New Year.

In the film, an 11-year old boy says he is older now and has stopping crying at night for missing his parents. A 7-year-old girl says she's not sure her mom can tell her apart from her twin sister. It's been too long since their mother, a migrant worker, has come back home. A 7-year-old boy wants to see his parents and asks them to bring to him a bike as gift. The film also shows scenes from the parents' workplaces in the cities, with one father wearing a helmet in a construction site saying he really misses his children, but this year's work was particularly busy. The suspense focuses on the question whether the children will be able to see their parents this New Year. Later the viewers see the parents of the three families arriving their homes in a red Coco-Cola van, driven by a uniformed driver, reuniting with their children and the grandparents, and then sitting at the New Year banquet table where Coke bottles are placed next to the abundant food. The red Coke mingles well into the red colors of New Year celebration around the house. The problem and solution is visually represented by contrasting images of separation and reunion, with emotional moments such as the mother arriving at home and asking her daughter "Who am I?" and getting the reply "You are Mommy!" Aired right before 2014 Chinese New Year, the message of "going home" echoes with millions of people making their way home from cities across the country to celebrate the Lunar New Year with family. The minifilm can be seen as a successful public service announcement that enhances the brand image while bringing awareness to a social problem.

### Independent Documentary Film

Since the early 1990s, so-called "underground" and "independent" documentary films have emerged in the public domain of mainland China, and received attention in international film festivals (Berry, 2010; Liu, 2006; Wang, 2005). As digital cameras became affordable to the middle class, independent filmmakers use methods of direct cinema to address "the spectrum of life the government usually stakes off as taboo: prostitution, bureaucratic corruption, rural protests against land expropriation, the impoverished elderly and mentally handicapped, a compromised education system, religious fervor, homosexuality, and just sexuality period (Nornes, 2009: 50)."

Independent filmmakers documenting the lives of LB children usually have close ties to the area when the film is shot, and are more or less familiar with the characters in the film. They tend to structure the film as day-in-life story, depicting how the children cope with their parents' absence living with grandparents or other relatives. Due to limited funding, the films usually do not include scenes of the city workplaces of the parents. The filmmaker captures the moments from the lives of LB children in a detailed manner that reveals the challenges of living without their parents. This could include the material conditions of their daily existence and their psychological state, as expressed through their activities in isolation or ways of interacting with others. In this narrative structure, there is little immediate conflict or confrontation, and probably there is no resolution, even though the conditions of the character could be seen as highly problematic in the eyes of the audience. For instance, the child walks alone at night with a flashlight to return home from school, or escape classes to play pokers.



This narrative structure is utilized in the work of independent filmmaker Jiang Nengjie, who was himself a "left behind" child. Jiang Nengjie was born in Hunan in 1985, and graduated from university in 2008. He worked briefly in the city, and spent nearly six years from 2009 to 2014 to complete a series of documentaries about his hometown, returning to the city sometimes to work and raise funds. These include mini-films "Road," "When I Grow Up," and a 92 minute-long "Children at a Village School." In this remote village in Hunan Province, 80 per cent of children are left behind. As a new college graduate, Jiang started his filming projects after learning that the school in his home village with 22 children was shutting down. Through temporary teaching at the school, working on and off in the city and fundraising, he managed to create several films documenting the growth journey of several village children, and the decaying state of his home village. He stated that his motivation for the projects was to

raise concern about the issue to help maintain the small village school, and later, to raise funds to get a substitute teacher and school bus, as some children had to walk three to four hours a day to go to school. The films also raise questions about the fate of these children and the effect of their upbringing.

Jiang's films were watched by a lot of viewers online, and were featured at Songzhuang Documentary Festival in Beijing and Guangzhou International Documentary Festival in China. In 2014, through public support, "Children at a Village School" was being screened at Guangzhou, Changsha, Wuhan, Beijing and other large cities. While the children have grown up in the years between the different films, their classrooms are still shabby, and their dreams of love still unfulfilled, even though the village school managed to receive donations and visits from volunteers and a BBC filming crew.



One of the appeals of the documentary films of Jiang Nengjie comes from the visual depictions of the living environment of the LB children, which can have a strong impact on the audience from urban regions unfamiliar with poverty. The children's stained and bulky clothes, unwashed faces, the muddy road in front of the house, the smoky kitchen where firewood is used for cooking, the fence made of split bamboo, and water basin for washing clothes with, all offer vivid details of the daily lives of the children and their struggle for survival. While the images might represent a typical rural household, sometimes among them there is an object which seems to be surprisingly fancy, such as a brand-new schoolbag with foreign cartoon characters, which is probably a gift from their absent parents. These images bring to the audience in urban areas visual evidence of the theme of the film, reflecting the reality of widespread loneliness among the left behind children. Different from the corporate documentaries, the independent filmmaker does not intend to create an "upbeat" mood or avoid showing embarrassing moments in their films, including

moments when parents returning from the city could not recognize their children. As they see different sides of the lives of their subjects and the odds they face, there is often an ambivalent attitude toward the future of these children, even when some progress is seen in the films.



### The University/Volunteer Team Documentary

Another type of documentaries about LB children is made because of the arrival of outsiders at the rural village, for instance, "School in the Depth of the White Cloud," a 2012 documentary about 40 volunteers from Shanghai visiting the mountainous region Jiangxi Province during the traditional Lunar New Year Dragon Boat Festival. In this story line, a team of volunteers or college students arrives from the city to a rural village or school for short term teaching or aid activities. Usually shot from the visitors' point of view as a byproduct of their service trip, the film narrates the undesirable conditions they see, the local children they encounter, and the efforts and activities they engage in to help the locals. In the process the two sides coming from different background and age groups discover about each other and challenge each other in unexpected ways, and find their existing views about the world somewhat changed because of the encounter and the eye-opening experience.

A recent example of a film with this narrative structure is "Summer of Sangying Town," which highlights the 20-day experience of a group of students from Shanghai Maritime University to address the needs of left-behind children in a boarding school in Anhui province in a hot summer. The 50-minute film made in 2013 described the reactions of the students to the living conditions of the children and their efforts in providing psychological counseling and bringing entertainment to brighten the monotonous life of children. It documented their efforts in utilizing limited resources to launch a moot court, sports games, music classes, and a carefully organized variety

show, eventually forming certain level of friendship with the children. While the students fulfilled their scheduled tasks and delivered help that was appreciated by the local children and villagers, they also found their power to help the children rather limited. For instance, upon arrival at the boarding school the college students tried to improve conditions of the shabby boarding school dormitory full of bunk beds. While they managed to shop in the local market and install mosquito-proof screens on the windows, they found it too difficult to changing the lighting structure of the dim room.

Another example of a film with this structure is titled *Grass on the Plain*, made by 8 graduate students of Southwest University of China who were assigned to teach for one year at Wushan County in Chongqing, as part of their education requirement. The college students found that the children's vision of the outside world was limited to the Wushan county center, and they were mostly introvert and short in confidence or desire to study, and at the same time yearning for family love. The film focuses on the graduate students' effort to adjust to a life in the isolated poverty-stricken rural village, communicate with the children, gain their respect, and help them strengthen emotional ties with their parents. They managed to acquire online chat facilities, and gradually helped the children learn information about the outside world and build a dream about their own future. It was awarded first prize in the Western China international film festival in September 2013. The film's director, Li Jie, later produced another film about a LB children's family.

For films of this structure, one of the themes driving story development is how the visitors engage in problem solving initially to deal with some material needs of the children, and through the process develop a relationship with the local children. These children usually have different communication styles with city children who tend to be the center of attention of the family, surrounded by their parents and grandparents due to China's one-child policy. Another theme is insight and growth. As the outsiders are young people who grow up in comfortable surroundings and hold somewhat romantic notions of remote areas, the encounter with the LB children often raises questions about their own assumptions, as well as strength to endure hardship and problem-solving abilities, leading to new ways of looking at their own lives in the city.

## Conclusion

Documentaries often attend to social issues of which we are consciously aware. They can be seen as a symbolic form that unites the argumentative and the aesthetic functions of discourse. They are not transparent renderings of situations. They are not what postmodernists call discursive constructions either. Through a variety of story telling devices and strategies, a text can make itself believable as representation of reality. "A slice of life" can take on the quality of being about something meaningful and profound. While different storytellers start the filmmaking process with a variety of motivations and may frame the issue of LB children from a particular angle of their choice, the outcomes are also shaped by the fact that families and villages with LB children vary vastly in their individual situations.

The issue of children being left behind can be viewed from many perspectives, such as their schooling, their psychological and emotional state, their access to adequate material resources like nutritional food, their interactions with other children and adults, and so on. While the storytellers engage dramatic forms such as conflict or problem/resolution, the plight of many of these children raises more questions than answers, drawing the sensibilities of the audience and engaging them in a reflection of the human price paid for modernization. Although the situations of the children are vastly different from that of the audience in the cities, the universal themes of family, love, and dream can make these films widely appealing with an intricate manner.

In August 2014, a new documentary about LB children premiered in Beijing, entitled *Stories Through 180 Lenses*. It is funded by Porsche China's "Empowering the Future" program and directed by well-known director Zhang Yimou (CSR News, 2014). The production team distributed 180 digital video cameras free of charge to children in 72 schools in remote Southwest China. Ninety percent of the half-hour film consists of footage shot over six months by 2,000 children. As the children take cameras in their own hands, the audience can expect another way for the expression of their daily encounters, emotional reflections and artistic creativities to be depicted in a fresh manner.

### **Bibliographical references:**

- Berry, C., Xinyu, L., & Rofel, L. (Eds.). (2010). *The new Chinese documentary film movement: For the public record* (Vol. 1). Hong Kong University Press.
- Chouliaraki, L. (2006). *The spectatorship of suffering*. Sage.
- Corner, J. (1995) *Television Form and Public Address*. London: Edward Arnold.
- CCR CSR News (June 20, 2014) *China's "Left-Over Children" Face Greater Chances of Psychological Problems, Juvenile Delinquency and Sexual Assault*. [http://www.ccrcsr.com/news/china's-"left-over-children"-face-greater-chances-psychological-problems-juvenile-delinquency](http://www.ccrcsr.com/news/china's-)
- CSR News (2014). *Porsche China Continues to Support Children's Education and Premieres Documentary on Rural Children* by Zhang Yimou. <http://www.porsche.com/china/en/aboutporsche/aboutporschechina/csr/news/?pool=china&id=2014-08-29-cn&lang=en>
- Donald, S. (2005). *Little friends: Children's film and media culture in China*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Liu, J. (2006). The rhetoric of local languages as the marginal: Chinese underground and independent films by Jia Zhangke and others. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 163–205.
- Nornes, A. M. (2009). *Bulldozers, Bibles, and very sharp knives: The Chinese independent documentary scene*.
- Silverstone, R. (2004). Mediation and communication. In G. Calhoun et al. (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Sociological Analysis*. London: Sage.
- Su, S., Li, X., Lin, D., Xu, X., & Zhu, M. (2013). Psychological adjustment among left-behind children in rural China: the role of parental migration and parent-child communication. *Child: care, health and development*, 39(2), 162–170.
- Sun, Y. (November 12, 2013). Left-behind, but not forgotten. *China Daily*. [http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-11/12/content\\_17097625.htm](http://usa.chinadaily.com.cn/epaper/2013-11/12/content_17097625.htm)
- Wang, Y. (2005). *The amateur's lightning rod: DV documentary in postsocialist China*.
- Wen, M., & Lin, D. (2012). Child development in rural China: Children left behind by their migrant parents and children of nonmigrant families. *Child Development*, 83, 120–136.
- Zeng, X. (2013) *Analysis of media reports of left-behind children: Case study of China Youth Daily*. Master's degree thesis, Southwest University. (in Chinese) accessed from <http://www.docin.com/p-805433612.html>

### **Biographical note**

Janice Hua Xu, PhD is Assistant Professor of Communications, at School of Arts and Sciences, Holy Family University, Philadelphia, USA.